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OLD CHINA HAND AND TRIPLE AGENT*

Oliver Caldwell, an "emotional ally of the Chinese people," served with the OSS in China in 1944 and 1945, part of that time working in liaison with the Chinese spy organization under Tai Li, the "Himmeler of Nationalist China," as Caldwell calls him. Caldwell is a compassionate and humane man, and he quickly became disgusted with what he saw as the brutality, callousness, authoritarianism and corruption of wartime "Free China." He became involved in a vague kind of plot by several secret societies and (apparently) the warlords Fend Yü-hsiang and Li Tsung-jen to remove Chiang Kai-shek and Tai Li and install what they (and Caldwell) called a "new, moderate democratic government." Caldwell recommended that the United States support this plot; the idea was discussed in Washington, but nothing came of it. Caldwell's major thesis is that if this country had followed his advice we would have spared ourselves much grief in China.

This is in many ways an appealing book, and it should be a popular one. It has adventure and romance: plots, gossip, travellers' tales, war stories and local color. We get insights into the continued importance of secret societies in Chinese life and into the cloak-and-dagger game between Tai Li and the OSS—each, it seems, more concerned with subverting the other than with controlling the Japanese. The main value of the book, however, is probably not in what it reveals about Chinese but, rather, in what it reveals about certain American attitudes toward China.

Thus, there is the attitude that if we help organize a coup and throw the rascals out, all will be well. In South Vietnam in 1963 we actually did carry out such a program, and the results so far have been less than edifying. Caldwell's analysis of the advantages of his plan is not very convincing. There is no evidence that the adjectives "moderate," "democratic," "middle-of-the-road," which Caldwell applies to the group of gangsters and warlords he was working with, are particularly appropriate. It is also dubious that his group would have had the physical or moral force to avert the chaos that would probably have followed a coup. The story of the plot indicates a certain frivolity in the American policy process at that time. Caldwell was told by his superiors to maintain contact with the plotters; but then we failed to follow through with the plot. At this point, of course, Tai Li had a free hand to move against the Chinese involved in the plot. It would seem that we thus managed to antagonize both the government and the opposition which had looked to us for protection; nor, I imagine, were the Communists, looking from the outside, overly impressed by American political sagacity. The most honorable course would probably have been to refrain from interference; but once we were in, we probably should have carried through.

This, of course, is not Caldwell's fault. But there are also some troubling aspects to his own attitude. In his discussion there seems to be a certain lack of "principle"—not cynicism or perfidy, but a kind of completely unreflective pragmatism, an unwillingness to think through the consequences of actions. Thus, we are told that we "could not expect the Chinese to adopt our brand of Jeffersonian democracy" (p. 12), and that the Stilwell "policy of not taking sides in domestic politics was fundamentally sound" (p. 36). Caldwell does not try to reconcile this with advocacy of American involvement in attempts to subvert the recognized government; it does not even seem to occur to him that there might be a contradiction here.

There is also a kind of innocent obtuseness in Caldwell's outlook. "All of this time I was in effect a triple agent. I was an American army officer assigned to the OSS, which had detailed me to Tai Li's Secret Military Police. With the approval of my OSS colonel I worked through Mr. Chen with the secret societies, which were now dedicated to overthrowing Chiang Kai-shek." Yet Caldwell seems

* Oliver J. Caldwell: *A Secret War: Americans in China, 1944-1945*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972. Pp. xx, 218. \$5.95.)

continued

to feel that because he was not trusted, and that he was not a triple agent, a condemnation because he disliked Americans—attitudes, perhaps, a bit out of place in a triple agent.

Caldwell considers himself an "Old China Hand." He represents, perhaps, much of what was best in that type; but he also shares many of its limitations. He seems to have at best a shallow understanding of Chinese culture (a trivial, but elementary, example: the identification of the Hakka as a "non-Chinese" "minority tribe" [p. 151], and no understanding at all of the "rabid nationalism" prevalent among large sections of Chinese society at that time. He tells us that "knowledgeable Chinese looked to us as their protector" (p. 33). He also shows us where that got them, although he does not draw the proper moral from it. Although he knows better, Caldwell consistently evaluates Chinese according to how well they embody American values. There is in this attitude a kind of subtle imperialism, not obvious to Americans of good will, but galling to many Chinese. When this attitude becomes manifest in action against the regular government in support of those outside who will "support our objectives" (p. 192), the imperialism becomes a little less subtle.

The OSS "regarded itself as exclusively an American agency, fighting America's war" (p. 76). This is quite proper. But Caldwell does not allow the propriety of Tai Li's fighting China's war, which, despite American illusions, was not quite the same war. Tai Li, from all accounts, was not a very nice man. But I do not think the particular indictments against him in this book stand up. He is called the "sword-arm of the conservative clique" (p. 20). Sword-arm he certainly was, but he was not very "conservative"; his social policy, such as it was, seems to have been an authoritarian, nationalistic leftism. In Caldwell's view Tai Li's main crime was anti-Americanism; he was the "enemy of US democracy" (p. 73). It would seem more realistic to say that he was not especially anti-American, just pro-China (of course, in his own fashion). He is condemned for not fighting the Japanese, but in fact his outfit had been carrying out anti-Japanese maneuvers long before resistance became official policy. By 1944 Japanese collapse was only a matter of time. The United States had chosen to prosecute the war on the Pacific Islands rather than on the China mainland, and, from a strictly rational point of view, there was no incentive on the Chinese side to feed any more of their armies to the Japanese. From Tai Li's point of view, the Japanese were not the only dangerous foreigners in China. There were also the American allies, who in the past had reaped all the advantages that the European imperialists had won by war, and who currently were attempting to penetrate his organization. "Subjectively," we had no ambition for gain at China's expense; the Chinese, conceivably, would see things differently. Caldwell's main theme concerns American implication in an attempt to overthrow Tai Li, and he also repeats a rumor to the effect that eventually the OSS murdered Tai Li (p. 203). Perhaps Tai Li's distrust was based upon something more than a fond election of evil.

One hesitates to be too harsh about this book. Caldwell is clearly a warm, courageous man, full of sympathy, good will and good intentions—good intentions sufficient to pave an interstate to hell. The major lack would seem to be one of empathy and political sophistication. There are not too many directly applicable "lessons" in this book: fortunately for ourselves and for them, the Chinese are no longer in a position to be patronized by foreigners. But one of Caldwell's points remains valid: American officials who deal with China, or any other country, should have some understanding of that country.

—PETER R. MOODY, JR.